

# Thoreau the Poet. Naturalist

It was a happy thought of his friend, Henry Channing, himself a poet and something more, to style our Concord Hermit a "poet-naturalist." Henry Thoreau, born in Concord in July 1817, and dying there in May 1862, was so intimate with Nature that there seemed to be no years of his life and no hour of his day when she did not whisper some of her secrets in his ear. He was in this sense a naturalist, - and also in the more customary usage of the word, - a man who studied and arranged methodically in his mind the facts of outdoor nature. He was a good botanist, a fair ornithologist, a wise investigator of insects and fishes, and observer of the wind, the clouds, the seasons and all that goes to make up what we call "weather" and "climate." But all this research, with its accumulated knowledge of more than forty years, he held not so much for use as for delight.



He was in heart a poet, and  
"Poetry," <sup>as</sup> said the unfortunate West, Gray's  
friend, "is an imitation of nature. The poet consid-  
ers all her work in a superior light; he  
discovers every secret trait of the great mother,  
and painted in its due beauty and  
proportion. The moral and the physical  
pored all open fairly to his enthusi-  
astic imagination; like some clear-flowing  
stream, he reflects the beautiful prospect  
all around; but he separates and dispo-  
ses Nature's colors in their justest and  
most delightful appearance." This  
passage, written 100 years before  
Thoreau began to be known to the  
world, describes and foretells him  
with great exactness. "Like some clear-  
flowing stream" Thoreau did "reflect  
the beautiful prospect all around,"  
and for his model, Mother Nature  
gave him the wide meandering  
Indian nose of Concord, and the  
four lakes, Walden Pond and  
White Pond, by which he dwelt  
or rambled so great a part  
of his life. Reflection of what  
is above and around these cool  
waters is a great part of their



mission in the world; and I have  
 seen them fulfil this duty with the  
 greatest punctuality and the sweetest  
 grace. Reflection, too, was a chief  
 part of Thoreau's mission - reflect-  
 ion and its counterpoise, expression;  
 and he too fulfilled this double du-  
 ty with exactness and gentleness  
 with grace. He identified himself  
 with nature more completely than  
 any person of our times; and for  
 this reason he seemed to  
 draw himself so much from the  
 companionship of his fellow-men.  
 But let us remember that, in our  
 short voyage, we are forbidden  
 to look to the man at the wheel  
 whose attention must be con-  
 centrated upon his task of steer-  
 ing the ship; - so Thoreau had  
 been placed by the good Powers  
 where he was, not to chatter  
 with the passengers, but to catch  
 the star, the wind, and all  
 that concerned the voyage  
 of life. That he did this to some  
 purpose, we see by the ever-  
 widening circle of influence  
 which his work has spread  
 about him. Being dead he speaks.



Yet it is a common error to suppose that there was anything fierce, savage or unsocial in Thoreau. He was plain-spoken, truth-loving, even contradictory; <sup>so that</sup> Emerson said of him at his funeral, "It cost him nothing to say No; indeed, he found it much easier than to say Yes." But he was strongly affectionate in the circle of his friends; he did not highly admire mankind, <sup>in general,</sup> but he wished to serve them; and he never sought to derange or demolish the social structure, except as it interfered with his own freedom of action. His hermit life at Walden was, not a selfish withdrawal from duty; it was much more the religious retirement of one who has taken a vow, and who must prepare himself steadily for its performance. He was, indeed, as his friend said of him, "a person of a rare, tender and absolute religion, incapable of any profanation, by act or by thought." No one who knew him would say him



and affectation; he was more unlike his neighbors in his thought than in his action."

I had the opportunity of knowing well not only this remarkable person, but also his father and mother, his younger sisters, and his more distant relatives, with their family history. There was nothing distinguished in his ancestry or the fortunes of his family; on the father's side they were small merchants, originally from the island of Jersey in the English channel, where a French strain mingled with his English or Scandinavian blood. On the other side he was of Scotch descent, counting Burnaby and Burns among the names of his feminine ancestors. Sincerity and humor came from the Scotch connection; from his father and grandfather he inherited a great steadiness of mind, somewhat at variance with his mother's vivacity. Manual dexterity he also inherited, so that he practiced



The simple mechanic arts with  
ease and skill, and could have  
earned his living without difficulty  
at one or several trades. His mathe-  
matical drawing and his out-door  
habits fitted him to be a land survey-  
or, and by that art as well as  
by pencil-making, coloring and wre-  
thing, he paid his way in the world,  
and left a bit of income from  
his books, to those who came  
after him. He never sought to accu-  
mulate property, not even books, of which  
he was a great lover - nor to do more  
work than was needful to support him.  
He said: "Those slight labors which af-  
ford me a livelihood, and by which  
I am to some extent serviceable to my  
contemporaries, are as yet commonly  
a pleasure to me; and I am not re-  
minded that they are a necessity, but  
I foresee that, if my wants should  
be <sup>much</sup> increased, the labor required to  
supply them would become a drudgery.  
If I should sell both my fore-  
noon and afternoon to Society, as  
most appear to do, I am sure that  
for me there would be nothing left



worth buying for. I trust that I shall  
never thus sell my birthright for  
a mess of pottage;

Simplicity of living, and an opportunity  
for his own chosen pursuits, amidst  
the eager rush of mankind for wealth  
and consideration, were Thoreau's  
aims, these he fully accomplished,  
and his success in these is part of  
the lesson he teaches now. "It would  
be glorious," he says, "to see mankind  
at leisure for once. It is nothing  
but work, work, work; there is no Sabbath.  
I cannot easily buy a blank book  
to write thoughts in; they are common-  
ly ruled for dollars and cents. I  
think there is nothing, not even crime,  
more opposed to poetry, & philosophy,  
ay, to life itself - than the incessant  
business" Forty years ago, when  
Thoreau said this, and lived up  
to it, there was much more need  
of it in New England, than  
there is now. At that time the  
Yankee worked twelve or sixteen  
hours a day, had few holidays, no  
amusements, and wore himself out  
with toil. Now eight or ten hours  
work is the rule, leisure is far  
more abundant, and there are  
soon to be too many holidays. The



increased wealth of the whole com-  
 munity makes it easier to live  
 with less toil; and the pressure of  
 dense population does not yet  
 weigh us down. But I have an an-  
 ticipated his time, and set the exam-  
 ple for others. He was the most in-  
 dustrious, and yet the most leisurely  
 man in Concord, - exceeding even Al-  
 cott and Ellery Channing in the  
 amount of time he had at the dis-  
 posal of his family and his intimate  
 friends. For his own uses, he exercised  
 an absolutely controlling and command-  
 ing hand, and finding, at one  
 period that he could not do this  
 satisfactorily to himself, he borrowed  
 Alcott's key, went out into Emers-  
 on's new wood lot on the north  
 side of Holden Pond, cut a few  
 trees, built a cabin, and lived there  
 for more than two years, while  
 he was preparing his first book  
 for publication - "A Week on the  
 Concord and Merrimack Rivers".  
 He had lived near to Nature before,  
 but now she took him home to board.



It is the thought and abstraction recorded by Thoreau during his hermitic life at Walden that have thus far proved of greatest interest to the world, and his book of that name still sells faster I am told, than any of those published by him, or by others since his death. This is no doubt because so many persons have cherished the dream of a solitary life amid the rugged beauties of nature, and seeing that one man of modern times, not compelled by necessity, as Robinson Crusoe was, did actually carry out this dream, men are curious to know how it succeeded. For Thoreau's own purposes it was a complete success; but as indicating that men in general ought to go out into the woods & live, or that Thoreau wished them to do so, the experiment had no value. What he sought for himself was freedom from needless cares, so that he might do needful work and enjoy unspoiled thought. What he desired for other men was to withdraw them also from the



annoyance of unceasing care and  
 labor, to relieve their daily life  
 from some of its needful burdens, and  
 open their minds to the true wisdom  
 and joy of living. It was because  
 men made themselves willing stud-  
 ges, and contented themselves with  
 low and shallow thoughts, vain  
 hopes, and ignoble desires, that  
 he held his fellow-creatures cheap;  
 when they lived simply and right-  
 eously, he admired them. Nor  
 did he reject or despise civiliza-  
 tion, though he uttered many vil-  
 gel or humorous paradoxes con-  
 cerning it. He valued the savage  
 life for what it gave in the way  
 of freedom and margin; but he  
 was no barbarian himself, and  
 did not wish his contemporaries  
 to go back to the savage state.  
 In his journal, where he recorded  
 those thoughts which his friends  
 have been giving to the world  
 at intervals, ever since his death  
 he once wrote:

"Here is a whole race, the Indian, inevi-  
 tably and resignedly passing away, in spite



your efforts & Christianize and Educate them. The fact is, the history of the white man is a history of improvement, - that of the red man a history of fixed habits or stagnation." This was his latest and deliberate opinion.

No man held more closely to his friend, or felt their loss more keenly. The death of his only brother, John, threw him into an illness, and clouded all his after-life by the recollection of that sad day. A few years before his own death, he wrote, (Feb 23 1857)

"At the instant I seem to be saying farewell forever to one who has been my friend, I find myself unexpectedly near to him; and it is our very nearness and cleaving to each other that gives depth and significance to that 'farewell'." Thus I am a helpless prisoner, and these chains I have no skill to break. I have not yet known a friendship to cease I think; I fear I have experienced its decay. Morning, noon and night, I suffer a physical pain, an aching of the breast, such unfits me for any task. It is perhaps most intense 'at evening'." Ten years earlier he had written, forebodingly, "The only danger in friendship is that it will end". In both none of his intimate friendships did end, - for the chain that



seemed to be unflinching itself held firm when adversity and illness put its tension to the test.

Yet there was ever in Thoreau a mild and stoical quality, at variance with that apparent dependence on others which often knits the bonds of friendship most firmly. It was this which Emerson sought to exhibit in his selection of letters written by Thoreau, when he edited the little volume 25 years ago; and the omission of his more affectionate utterances has brought to much into prominence the independent side of his character. To lack of these individual and even pugnacious expressions of Thoreau do we find in his books, also, - but they do not show the man from all sides. He had to resist the strong tendency of American life towards immediate and money-making activity; yet his choice of a retired and almost provincial career sometimes disturbed his own conscience.



In "Walden" when describing  
an afternoon spent in rambling  
and fishing, he turns back upon  
himself and says,

Thoreau himself was inspired by it,  
when he said: "My haste to catch pick-  
erel, wading in retired meadows, in  
sloughs and bog-holes, in forlorn and  
savage places, appeared for an instant  
trivial to me, who had been sent to school  
and college. But as I ran down the hill  
towards the reddening west, with the  
rainbow over my shoulder, and some faint  
tinkling sounds borne to my ear through  
the cleansed air from I know not what  
quarter, my good genius seemed to say,—  
"Go fish and hunt far and wide; day by  
day farther and wider; and rest thee by  
many brooks and hearthsides without  
misgiving. Rise free from care before  
the dawn, and seek adventures. Let the  
noon find thee by other lakes, and night  
overtake thee everywhere at home.  
There are no larger fields than these,—  
no worthier games than may here be  
played." And indeed, such was Thoreau's  
life, as we look back upon it,—a game  
played in the great fields of Nature,—a  
ramble through time and eternity, where  
each locality, like these environs of Con-  
cord, became by turns magically vast and  
magically small,—the macrocosm and the  
microcosm of the Universe.

Thus the provincial and  
parochial youth becomes  
the cosmopolitan thinker,  
whose best words even  
quote the best minds in  
all parts of the  
English speaking  
world.

A few particulars may be given  
of his life at Walden; for it



Returning to Concord in the early winter  
of 1843-4, Thoreau joined his father in  
pencil-making during the next year,  
that being the family vacation for many  
years. But he did this only while  
waiting for a quicker appreciation  
of his literary talent, and his inter-  
est was always in nature and  
literature, and his own thoughts.  
He rambled about the woods and  
fields, no longer with a gun, as  
had been his delight in youth,  
but seeking nobler game. There  
could be shot from a tree or a wall.

He was meditating that retirement  
beside Walden Pond, which was  
to be as productive of good writing  
as his voyage up the New Hamp-  
shire rivers had been; and indeed  
it was in his Walden Hermitage  
that he wrote out and edited his  
"Week on the Concord and Mern-  
mac". Walden is the best known  
part of Concord now; and many  
of our visitors



~~So many visitors in Concord,~~

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the interest of the Concord pilgrimage centres about Walden, where Emerson walked in his own pine-wood, and where Thoreau dwelt for many months, and entertained his friends in his little cabin. His going there was determined partly by his early love for that fair water, and partly by the fact that Emerson, a year before, had bought land there. In October, 1844, Emerson wrote to his brother William; "In one of my solitary wood-walks by Walden Pond, I met two or three men who told me they had come there to sell and to buy a field, on which they wished me to bid as purchaser. As it was on the shore of the pond, and now for years I had a sort of daily occupancy in it, I bought it—eleven acres, for \$8.10 an acre. The next day I carried some of my well-beloved gossips to the place, " (Thoreau was one of them, no doubt)," and they deciding that the field was not good for anything if Hartwell Bigelow should cut down his pine-grove, I bought, for \$125 more, his pretty wood lot of three or four acres; and am now landlord and water-lord of fourteen acres, more or less, on the shore of Walden, and can raise my own blackberries." This "field" of 1844 has now become a grove, and where Thoreau used to sit in his cabin-door and look out upon the pond, trees have grown up that hide all but a glimpse of the water from the pilgrim-visitor who goes to add a stone to the cairn that now marks the site of the hut. It was the next spring after this purchase that Thoreau, then twenty-seven years old, borrowed an axe of Mr. Alcott and went into the new wood lot to cut the timber for his house. He encamped there more than two years, but in that time made one of his journeys to the Maine woods, and when he left Walden, he went to live in Emerson's house, during its master's absence in Europe. Emerson sailed Oct. 5, 1847, and this was a month later than Thoreau's withdrawal from the woods, which took place Sept. 6. The cabin was sold to a gardener, and afterwards became the property of a farmer in the northwest corner of Concord, three or four miles from its original site. There it stood, not far from Estabrook Farm, one of the more distant resorts of the walkers, until by neglect and decay it fell in pieces soon after Thoreau's death in 1862.

that Lakelet,  
two years and a half

that Estate.

x From Jul 1845  
to September 1847

(Here the European  
correspondence)

a few miles W. of Walden  
Lake



The course of Thoreau's life after he left Malden, at the age of thirty, maybe briefly indicated. He spent the best part of a year in the Emerson household, acting as the head of it, in the absence of its master, and writing much also while there. Then he became better known to the world as an author, after the publication of his first book, "The Week", and was called upon to lecture now and then, or to write for such magazines as were then available. He also became expert as a land-surveyor, and had much work to do about Concord in that capacity, sometimes in other places, as at Plymouth or Wykewood in New Jersey. Besides all this he lent a hand now and then to the family occupation, which had ceased to be pencil-making, and become the preparation of black lead, (plumbago) for electrotyping. In what he calls "the yellow house" (which was that where his family last lived in Concord, and where the Alcotts afterwards lived for ten years) there was a large chamber used as a shop where the plumbago was got ready for shipping to the Harper



at New York, after having been grounded for  
 in a small mill a few miles away. Here  
 Thoreau's father, aided by his children,  
 did ~~their~~ work, which brought in a mod-  
 est income. Henry always paid board  
 to his mother, for he was extremely care-  
 ful in all money matters; but he was  
 strict in the control of his own time, and  
 for this reason did not much seek  
 society. Yet he was no recluse, like Hawthorne,  
 from shyness, nor had he any  
 morbid dislike of mankind. He of-  
 ten dined at his friends' houses, with  
 more or less company, and entertained  
 his mother's guests or his own,  
 with great courtesy. His manners  
 were grave and polite, and I have  
 seen him once or twice performing  
 his part at a large evening party  
 assembly, though he did not often  
 frequent such. He travelled much  
 in his later years, and always  
 with satisfaction; he published ac-  
 counts of these journeys, though not  
 very lively, were full of thought and  
 observation, and have been much  
 read. His way of life, however, was



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mainly that of a student; he read much,  
wrote daily in his journal, and was  
always aiming to perfect himself as  
a writer. He had the gift of expression  
by nature, and how well he wrote  
(at the age of 19 may be seen by  
this passage from one of his college  
papers, on Sublimity, (Read it)

But his later style, when at its best,  
was something very gentle and  
elegant, without losing any of  
its force thereby - as good prose  
as can be found in the language.  
Thoreau himself was not aware how  
well he had succeeded in this endeavor.  
or, for he said, "We linger in manhood to  
tell the dreams of our childhood; and  
they are half forgotten ere we acquire  
the faculty of expressing them." Channing  
has well given what will be the verdict  
of the future on his friend's success as  
an author; (Read it)

The same accurate observer has given  
the best portraiture of the man him-  
self; (Read it)

My own first impressions of Thoreau, much  
corrected afterwards, were thus given in  
my journal of 1855;



Later by twenty years and more, upon the death of Sophia Thoreau, his young sister, I had occasion to make these observations upon the whole family: (read them)

The biographies of Thoreau have been several already - the first being the funeral eulogy, read by Emerson in the village church, and printed in the volume called "Excursion". Then followed <sup>Channing's in 1864, the</sup> an English biography by Page, then my own volume in 1882, and now a more complete book than any, by an English disciple, Mr Henry Salt, published two months ago in London. The best biography however, though lacking in method, that of Channing, now quite out of print. Let me quote from this dear friend the account of his last days: (read it)

Thoreau's Editor is Mr Blake of Worcester, long a correspondent of the Concord Herald, - and his view of Thoreau's character may well be cited,